

SPAB Property Maintenance Guide

PREVENTION BETTER THAN CURE

On founding the SPAB in 1877, William Morris spoke of the need 'to stave off decay by daily care, to prop a perilous wall or mend a leaky roof'. In November 2004, the Society is running the second SPAB National Maintenance Week. Our aim is to build on the success of previous years' events and to highlight the importance of regular health checks for buildings, whatever their age. As with our own health, prevention is better than cure. Neglect of routine building maintenance results in the need for costly and disruptive remedial work. For example, failure to clear a gutter can cause a blockage, which may lead to damp and damage in a building. This guide provides a quick checklist to help you protect your building and to establish when advice and assistance is needed.

<p>The following general points are worth bearing in mind:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No two buildings are affected identically by decay but all suffer to some degree. When maintenance slips, owners are often surprised how quickly a structure can deteriorate. • Regular action is fundamental to good maintenance, coupled with knowledge of the major causes of decay, and a sound understanding of the construction and development of a building. The use of unsympathetic materials, such as inappropriate mortar for repointing joints in stone and brick walls can do more than damage a building's appearance. • Always take care of your own safety and that of others when undertaking maintenance. 	<p>C H E C K S Regular checks are a vital part of building maintenance. Check as frequently as you can, but preferably no less often than is suggested below.</p>
<p>Roof</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check your roof regularly. It is usually better to let a builder or surveyor, with necessary safety equipment, carry out a detailed roof inspection, but a neighbouring property may sometimes be useful as a vantage point and binoculars can also be helpful. Debris on the ground from broken slates and tiles indicates that there may be a problem. Have dislodged and missing slates and tiles reinstated before damage occurs to roof timbers or plaster ceilings. Avoid bitumen coatings and spray-on foam. They hinder proper inspection, prevent the re-use of slates or tiles and, by reducing ventilation, increase the risk of timber decay. • Inspect lead flashings and mortar fillets at chimneys for signs of decay. Problems will include holes or splits in leadwork and erosion of mortar. • Brush moss off roofs since it can block gutters, and retain moisture which may damage the roof covering in frosty weather • Parapet walls should be inspected for decay to masonry and mortar joints, and the junction between the parapet and an adjacent gutter should also be checked. 	<p>Monthly - slipped slates and tiles 6 Monthly - roofspace during heavy rain Annually - abutments - moss growth - pointing - parapets</p>

<p>Gutters and Rainwater Pipes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear gutters and rainwater pipes regularly. Frequent attention may be needed if the building is surrounded by trees, or perched on by pigeons. Be extra vigilant after adverse weather and autumn leaf fall. Signs of blockage to gutters and rainwater pipes may be most obvious during heavy rain, but stains on walls and plant growth provide clues. Inexpensive sets of rods can be purchased which have attachments for gutter and drain clearance. • Parapet and valley gutters deserve close attention. They also need to be cleared of snow to prevent melt water rising above them and causing damp internally. Even if safe access to valleys and parapets can normally be obtained, extra caution is needed under icy conditions. Also, great care must be taken to avoid damage to leadwork and use of wooden or plastic tools for snow clearance is advisable. <p>Drainage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not forget to monitor underground drainage. Gulleys beneath rainwater pipes should be cleaned out by hand (with gloves) and drains should be rodded out if they overflow during wet weather. 	<p>Monthly - check for any obvious leaks or blockage 6 Monthly - inspect gutters and downpipes in heavy rain Annually -clean gutters, downpipes, (and drains if showing signs of blockage).</p>
<p>Walls</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be sure not to allow ground levels around the building to rise unduly. Ideally, external ground levels should be at least 150mm below internal floor levels. Clear air bricks using a stick. They ventilate voids under timber floors and blockage can encourage rot. • Deeply eroded mortar joints in walls should be repointed. Whilst cement is fine for modern buildings, it is important to use a lime: sand mix without cement for most buildings pre-dating about 1900. Localised repointing is generally all that is required. • Pollution may affect the appearance of buildings. However, unless there is heavy soiling that is harming masonry, cleaning is usually inadvisable. 	<p>6 Monthly - clear air bricks Annually - inspect pointing - check ground level at wall bases</p>
<p>External Joinery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look at windows, doors, fascias and barge boards regularly, checking for cracked and rotten wood. Don't automatically replace whole components if you do find decay. A competent carpenter should be able to carry out effective repairs. • Painted external joinery can deteriorate rapidly if finishes are not maintained. Expect to redecorate external joinery every 3-5 years. Some of the linseed paints now available offer good durability. 	<p>Annually - Inspect paintwork</p>

<p>Roof Space</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If your loft has safe access and is boarded, see whether there is evidence of leaks or damage to the roof covering. Where daylight can be seen from inside, through gaps in the roof covering, moisture may well be able to enter. • Make sure that loft insulation is not restricting ventilation at the eaves. If there is an insufficient gap, condensation can cause timber decay. 	<p>6 Monthly - Inspect roofspace for leaks and signs of decay</p>
<p>Services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Floods with environmental causes are invariably disastrous, and sometimes impossible to avoid. However, localised flooding through pipe or tank bursts, caused by winter freezing, can be prevented by proper lagging. • Have your electrical and gas installation checked periodically by a qualified person. In case of gas leaks call 0800 111 999. • Smoke alarms should be regularly tested and cleaned. Remember to replace the batteries too! <p>Chimney Flues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chimneys should be regularly swept, and lined where a heating appliance requires it. 	<p>Monthly - check smoke alarm batteries 6 Monthly - vacuum dust from smoke alarms Annually - check pipe lagging (before winter) - have gas appliances serviced - sweep chimneys 5-10 yearly - have wiring checked professionally</p>
<p>Movement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subsidence can occur in clay areas with large trees in close proximity to buildings. Diagonal cracks greater than 5mm wide require monthly monitoring to establish whether they are increasing in length and width, indicating that there is on-going structural movement. If a crack appears minor, repointing with an appropriate mortar will prevent moisture entering. If the crack opens further after pointing, the advice of a chartered structural engineer should be sought. 	<p>Annually - look for any new cracks</p>
<p>Timber Defects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check annually for signs of rot (for instance, under stairs and in cupboards). Dampness and poor ventilation promote fungal and insect attack. It is important to address the underlying cause and not to rely solely on chemical timber treatment. Beware that some companies recommend the removal of more affected timber than is really necessary. 	<p>Annually - inspect timber for new decay</p>

<p>Dampness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As with rot, always aim to treat the cause rather than symptoms. Be aware that damp-proof courses, water-repellent solutions and plastic-type wall coatings do more harm than good when inappropriately applied to buildings. Where assistance is required, consult a chartered surveyor for independent advice rather than a remedial company with a vested interest in their own recommendations. 	<p>6 Monthly - look for signs of dampness</p>
<p>Garden vegetation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plants often enhance buildings, but consider control or removal of trees or climbers if there is evidence that they are damaging walls or blocking gutters. Ivy can force joints open and also damage the cores of solid masonry walls. If ivy is to be removed it should usually be cut just above ground level and, once dead, removed. 	<p>Annually - check plant growth on and near walls</p>
<p>Safety</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure you maintain your building safely. Ladders, lofts and roofs present particular hazards. It is best not to work alone, but think of the safety of helpers and others beneath if working above ground level. Safety equipment is needed for some jobs, including gloves for the clearance of drains or removal of pigeon droppings from gutters. Do not touch gas or electrical supplies unless you are qualified. If in any doubt about safe access, particularly on roofs and in attics, use a reputable, professional builder for inspection or work. For further advice the Health and Safety Executive's telephone line 08701 545500, or website www.hse.gov.uk may be of assistance. 	<p>CONSIDER CREATING A LOG BOOK to record maintenance repairs or alterations. This should help you, your professionals and future owners.</p>

In some cases maintenance work may require permission, including listed building consent if the structure is listed. Current legislation also prevents disturbance of certain types of flora and fauna, including bats.

The SPAB website www.spab.org.uk has details of publications and courses. The Society also operates a free telephone technical help line between 9.30am and 12.30pm on weekdays 020 7456 0916

The information is for guidance only. Do not take any risk with building maintenance. If in doubt seek advice from a suitably qualified professional.

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